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Baiyin Yang

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## Can Adult Learning Theory Provide a Foundation for Human Resource Development?

Baiyin Yang

**The problem and the solution.** The field of human resource development (HRD) has been viewed as being supported by three theoretical foundations—namely, economic, psychological, and system theories. Although contributions of adult learning theory have been long acknowledged, it is more important to recognize its unique role of incorporating three theoretical foundations and consequently providing a distinct foundation of HRD. By identifying the relationship between HRD and one of its closely related fields, adult education, this article argues that it is adult learning theory that provides a foundation and linkage for both fields.

**Keywords:** *adult learning theory; foundation of HRD; adult education*

Can adult learning theory provide a foundation for human resource development (HRD)? The question is inevitable. In the field of HRD, there has been a debate on whether performance or learning is most important for the field (Swanson, 1995; Watkins & Marsick, 1995). The performance view argues that the purpose of HRD is to improve organizational performance (Swanson & Arnold, 1996), whereas the learning view contends that HRD should develop individuals who ultimately contribute to organizational prosperity (Bierema, 1996). Nevertheless, all seem to agree that learning should be a vital component of HRD research and practice. A new conception of HRD views the field as including learning, performance, and change (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). Because HRD as a professional field has to work with all kinds of adults in various organizations for the purpose of facilitating learning, performance, and change at both individual and organizational levels, the question of how adults learn and its subsequent relation with their behavioral performance and change is a critical theme for both HRD scholars and practitioners. Although there are various definitions of learning and HRD, recent HRD texts recognize the unique role of adult

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learning theory (DeSimone, Werner, & Harris, 2002; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Noe, 2002; Swanson & Holton, 2001). For example, Swanson and Holton (2001) contended that “learning has always been at the heart of HRD, and it continues to be a core part of all paradigms of HRD” (p. 149). They classified learning theories at three levels: (a) metatheories of learning, and (b) learning theories at individual and (c) organizational levels. Several adult learning theories have been included as middle-range learning models at the individual level. Adult learning theory refers to a collection of several concepts and theories that explain how adults learn, and adult learning is reviewed as a process that adults engage in that results in a relatively long-term change in the domains of attitude, knowledge, and behavior. Although some adult learning concepts and theories such as social (cognitive) learning theory have been developed within the traditional discipline of psychology, others such as transformational learning theory and self-directed learning theory evolved in the field of adult education as an applied discipline. Following this reasoning, the uniqueness of adult learning theory as one of the foundations of HRD and its contributions should be recognized.

However, the contribution of adult learning theory to HRD theory and practice has never been fully explored. There is no comprehensive review of different adult learning theories in relation to HRD. Conventional HRD literature regards three major disciplines as foundations of the field (i.e., psychology, economics, and systems theory) and does not identify adult learning theory as one of the foundations (Swanson & Holton, 2001). A vivid metaphor for the field of HRD is the well-known three-legged stool model. On top of the stool is the key purpose of HRD—organization, process, and individual performance—the three legs of the stool represent three disciplines, and the stool is supposed to be built on a lug of ethics. It is believed that HRD theory is an integration of psychological, economic, and system theories within an ethical frame. This perspective implies that adult learning theory belongs to psychology and thus is covered in one of the three disciplines. If learning is a psychological process in terms of change in the domains of cognition, affect, and behavior, then it is critical to examine how learning theory provides a foundation for the psychological discipline. Unfortunately, conventional psychology has not yet incorporated those theories and concepts of adult learning that evolved outside the traditional field. Psychology as a discipline normally assumes that learning processes are the same for both children and adults and thus fails to pay adequate attention to the unique characteristics of adult learners. In addition, conventional psychology views learning as an individual process and normally excludes social and political factors of learning. Because HRD practices (e.g., training and development activities, performance improvement efforts, and change interventions) have to engage some type of learning activity with adult audiences and because many contemporary theories and concepts of

adult learning have yet to be included in mainstream psychology, it is imperative to explore how adult learning theory informs HRD research, practice, and theory building.

To explore the contribution of adult learning theory to HRD research and practice, it is critical to clearly define related fields and terms. HRD can be defined as “the process of facilitating organizational learning, performance, and change through organized interventions and initiatives and management actions for the purpose of enhancing an organization’s performance capacity, capability, competitive readiness, and renewal” (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000, p. 6). Adult education as professional practice and an applied field of study concerns how adults learn and develop throughout their life span. Adult education can be defined as “activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 8). In the field of adult education, in which many valuable concepts, models, and theories of adult learning have been developed, HRD has a negative connotation of inhumane capitalism and the cult for productivity (Bierema, 2000; Schied, 2001). Such perspective limits our efforts to draw implications of adult learning theory for the advancement of HRD theory and practice. As an applied field of study, adult education establishes its foundation on multiple disciplines including psychology, sociology, philosophy, political sciences, and history (Peters & Jarvis, 1991). From a theoretical perspective, adult learning theory can serve as a foundation of HRD because the study of adult learning can be viewed to be in the territory of psychology. As a matter of fact, studies of adult learning in the field of adult education have used not only a psychological approach but also sociocultural and holistic approaches from multiple disciplines. HRD, as an applied field of study and professional practice, needs a systematic investigation to reveal how various adult learning theories and concepts inform and contribute to HRD research and theory building. Although there has been an increasing body of literature on adult learning theory in the field of adult education, no systematic effort has been offered to critically evaluate the existing concepts and theories under a synthesis perspective (Merriam, 1993, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Therefore, it is important to critically examine the conceptualizations of the relationships between the two closely related fields—adult education and human resource development. A critical examination of the two fields may allow us to identify common philosophical foundations that inform the development of both fields.

### **How Is HRD Related to Adult Education?**

A variety of ideas has emerged about the relationship between adult education and HRD in their relatively short histories as fields of study and pro-

fessional practice. HRD as a field of study evolved from multiple disciplines including education, business administration, industrial/applied psychology, and communication (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Similarly, HRD academic programs tend to affiliate with varieties of university departments including administrative or educational leadership, adult education, career development, human resource management, industrial psychology, instructional design and technology, and vocational or technical education (Kuchinke, 2002). HRD academic programs have been hosted in various colleges and schools (e.g., education, business administration, social sciences, technology, and agriculture). Because of the multidisciplinary nature of HRD, it is essential to examine the conceptualizations of the relationships between HRD and one of its closely related fields—adult education. There are four views on the relationship between HRD and adult education in terms of identifiable academic fields. In the first view, HRD is separated from adult education and the two fields work independently to fulfill their own missions. The second view posits that HRD belongs to the field of adult education and thus implies HRD study should be part of a broadly defined field of adult education. In contrast, the third view holds that adult education belongs to a broadly defined field of HRD. The fourth view suggests that adult education and HRD are distinct and interrelated fields, identifies the similarities and differences between the two fields, and argues that the fields of adult education and HRD should work as close partners. The following section will examine the ideas of these four views on the relationship between HRD and adult education and discuss implications for the field.

The main idea of the first viewpoint is that the field of HRD has emerged as an independent entity (Willis, 1996). Viewing HRD as a boundary-flexing and evolutionary system, Willis (1996) argued that although adult education, like many other disciplines such as economics and instructional design and technology, is a visible part of the HRD milieu, the root disciplines of HRD should not limit the field in developing its own strong identity. This view implies a gradual but clear separation of the HRD field from its many root disciplines including adult education. This viewpoint has both advantages and disadvantages for the development of HRD as an academic and practical field. One powerful advantage comes from its visionary orientation and the name of HRD itself. Willis emphasized the importance of the HRD name with its own identities to “represent itself more accurately and to escape from limiting images” (p. 33). Another advantage of viewing and promoting HRD as a relatively independent field of study is its advocacy for unique identity. Such a view calls for progressive integration and differentiation for the field of HRD that will ultimately benefit advancement of the field. Because many practitioners are working in various areas with so many different titles, emphasizing the common HRD features that differentiate it from other professions can rally the field and build a strong profession. Lots

of organizations and their leaders still view HRD as simply one function of human resources and thus cannot recognize its potential value. However, this view also has some disadvantages for the advancement of the HRD field. Most of those in the field would agree that, at present, HRD is probably not mature enough to exist as a stand-alone discipline and professional field. As an academic field, HRD research and theory-building efforts have mainly used or borrowed theories or conceptual frameworks from other disciplines and fields. Few distinctive theories and concepts have been developed in the HRD field, recognized and accepted by other fields or disciplines, and utilized and validated in practice. Most theories and studies in the HRD field are beset with conceptual weaknesses and lack strong empirical support. Furthermore, limited resources in higher education institutions have constrained the development of HRD as an independent discipline or field of study. Most HRD programs have to share the academic homes with other fields such as adult education and instructional technology. In sum, the first view has its merit of being visionary and proactive but might be crippled by severe practical constraints. Nevertheless, the inspiration of campaigning and advancing a new field with its own identity and unique roles and contributions should never be dismissed.

The second view on the relationship between the fields of adult education and HRD posits that the former includes the latter. For example, two handbooks of adult education have regarded HRD as one of many specialty areas of the adult education professional practice (Merriam & Cunningham, 1989; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). The central characteristic of this view is the belief that HRD is essentially an educational process and HRD professionals should act as educators whose main task is to facilitate workplace learning. According to people who hold this view, the humanistic element of education is normally missed in HRD if it seeks optimal employee performance while aligning with corporate business strategy. Bierema (2000) maintained that corporate interests regularly prevail over individual interests. She believes that "HRD theory and practice have historically aligned with corporate interests, oftentimes at the expense of workers with less clout and power" (p. 282). She suggested that HRD should not be determined by the corporation but instead should be owned and provided by community and that HRD practitioners should join other adult educators to make organizations more socially responsible. Dirkx (1996) argued that HRD should move away from its reliance on market-based economic orientation. He suggested that the workplace is "a primary site for adult learning and the practice of adult education" (p. 44). It was concluded that HRD can be conceptualized as a form of adult education and that HRD needs to be informed by social justice and the democratic tradition of adult education.

The second view on the relationship between HRD and adult education also has both merits and limitations to the advancement of the field. At the academic

level, this view implies strong support from a relatively established field for HRD research and theory building. As a growing field, this is probably much needed to establish an academic home for HRD. However, this view may hinder the future advancement of the HRD field because adult education as one field of study may offer limited or even biased perspectives. With a relatively long history, adult education itself as a field of study is evolving and can offer limited assistance for the advancement of HRD. As a matter of fact, the mainstream literature in scholarly journals and research conferences in the adult education field tends to alienate the field of study from practice. Brookfield (2002) observed,

Within major adult education journals and at major research conferences, critical theory and postmodernism are influential theoretical discourses. Yet when we look at the field of practice, adult education's apolitical emphasis on personal development programs or on the incorporation of human capital perspectives into learning at the workplace allows the andragogical paradigms to reign supreme. (p. 86)

A quick examination of the subject index in the most recent handbook of adult and continuing education (Wilson & Hayes, 2000) revealed that those widely accepted and utilized theories and concepts are no longer the focus. For example, the term *andragogy* is used 10 times and *self-directed learning* is cited only 5 times in the handbook. In contrast, *positivism* has 19 entries, *postmodernism* has 32 entries, and *poststructuralism* has 12 citations. For most practitioners and scholars in the field, these "isms" tend to have little immediate implications. Consequently, current ideological bias and one dominant research paradigm may inhibit adult education as a field of study to offer substantive values for the advancement of HRD.

At the practice level, the second viewpoint has its merit in broadening the perspective of HRD practice. Adult learning concepts and theories that evolved in the field of adult education, such as andragogy, critical reflection, and transformational learning, provide valuable methods for HRD practitioners to facilitate learning, performance and change at both individual and organizational levels. However, a strong educational view of HRD may move HRD practice from its ultimate mission. In the "real world," life is not an ideal journal and we have to accept the fact that quality and innovation are brought by intense competition. On one hand, the humanistic and democratic tradition of adult education enlightens HRD practitioners not only to focus on organizational interests but also to act in a socially responsible way. On the other hand, such perspective tends to be ideal and most of its suggestions for HRD are prescriptive. Many practitioners tend to turn away from those ideological propositions.

The third view on the relationship between adult education and HRD posits that the former is included in the latter one. Although this view does not prevail in English literature, it can be found in some Asian countries, where HRD is regarded as a systematic effort not only for individual and organiza-



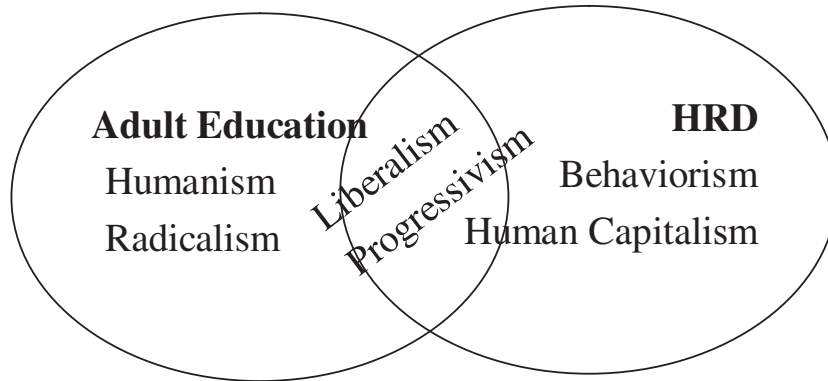
tional growth but also for social and national development. For example, Wen (2000) outlined the HRD policy and strategy in China, where adult education has been regarded as a vital component of the broad education system that provides human resources for national development. Another example can be found from a Thai perspective of HRD. It is defined as “an interactive process of enhancing and facilitating the development of capabilities and potentials of individuals, organizations, and communities” (Na Chiangmai, 1998, as cited in McLean & McLean, 2001). This view can hardly be accepted in the United States, where adult education has a strong impact on social movement and HRD is closely linked to individual and organizational performance. However, this perspective reminds us that professional fields of study and practice are determined by social and cultural contexts.

The central position in the last view on the relationship between HRD and adult education is that these two fields are different but interrelated (Peterson & Provo, 1996). It has been argued accordingly that these two fields should work as partners to fulfill their own missions (Yang, 2003a). This conclusion is based on an observation that these two fields are different even though they are closely related and that merging them as one field or working toward such a direction would be detrimental to both. This view is compatible with a holistic or dialectic perspective of learning and development (Yang, 2003b). Although we need to recognize the similarities and common foundations between the two fields, we should also identify some incompatibility and tension between these fields. Furthermore, we should even work hard on the difference side to maintain their identities and to advance both fields. What a holistic view suggests is a healthy relationship between the two fields in which they work side by side and each of the fields informs and facilitates the development of the other. A comprehensive discussion between these two fields is beyond the scope of this article. The following section briefly outlines the similarities and differences between these two fields in terms of their philosophical foundations and then argues that adult learning theory is a bridging foundation between them.

### **What are the Philosophical Foundations of HRD?**

A clear identification of HRD philosophy and theory is crucial for the development of the field (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Just as one cannot truly understand oneself without being compared with others, we cannot fully understand HRD unless it is compared with other fields. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that compares and contrasts adult education and HRD using their philosophical foundations. This framework posits that the two fields are interrelated or overlapped in their philosophical foundations. HRD has been determined mainly by behaviorism and human capitalism; humanism and radicalism tend to prevail in adult education. Although all of





**FIGURE 1: Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education and HRD**

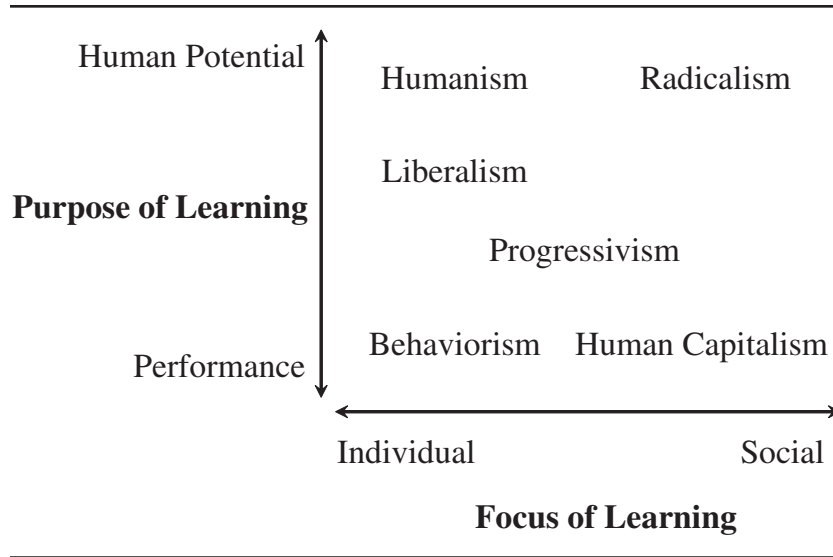
these philosophies can be observed in both fields, the two philosophies of liberalism and progressivism tend to be very well accepted by both fields.

Although adult education historically reflected all kinds of educational philosophies—namely, liberalism, behaviorism, progressivism, humanism, and radicalism (Elias & Merriam, 1995)—the mainstream literature in the field has been dominated by humanism and radicalism.

Despite different versions of humanism, the key purpose of humanistic education is to enhance personal growth and develop human potential. Closely related to the position of focusing on human potential, radicalism normally takes a social and political view and posits that human development is often constrained by the existing system and structure.

The above-mentioned five philosophies observed in the field of adult education are also reflected in HRD but to various extents. For example, both humanist and behaviorist perspectives can be observed in HRD, although the latter often overweighs the former. The concept of self-directed learning has been widely used in HRD practice. Perhaps the sharp difference between the two fields can be observed in their approach to the social implications and consequences of learning. The radical social reform perspective or critical philosophy has been a major theme in recent adult education literature (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). In contrast, human capitalism, which views learning as an investment, has been one of the key foundations for HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2001).

Although the dominant philosophies in HRD and adult education tend to be different, the two fields still share some commonalities. For example, each of the fields values both ideas and experiences, and each of them is the emphasis of liberalism and progressivism, respectively. A liberal perspec-



**FIGURE 2: Relationships Among Philosophical Foundations of Learning**

tive stresses the importance of acquiring formal knowledge and developing rational perspective, whereas a progressivism (or pragmatism) perspective places more value in knowledge and skills derived directly from observation and experience.

As a step toward a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical foundations of HRD and adult education, Figure 2 was created to describe the relationships among different philosophies along two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the purpose of learning, and the second one indicates the focus of learning. There are different philosophies of education and all of them are concerned with learning because we tend to have diverse beliefs and assumptions about learning activities. Those who assume that developing human potential is the main purpose of learning tend to emphasize the growth and development of human beings. In other words, it assumes that learning should be used to fulfill potential. In contrast, performance orientation believes that learning should be used to fulfill the needs of existing tasks and roles. The second dimension represents the relative role of the individual and society in the process of learning. Although some firmly believe individual learners should be the main focus of learning processes, others strongly emphasize social or organizational implications of learning. Those emphasizing social implications of learning tend to advocate some type of institutional or social control for the purpose of some shared or agreed on goods/outcomes.

As indicated in Figure 2, behaviorism assumes that the purpose of learning is to produce behavioral change in the desired direction and to increase performance. It also believes that individual learners should be the main focus of learning. Although the two other philosophies (liberalism and humanism) tend to hold the same belief of individual orientation, they have different views on the purpose of learning. As a sharp contrast to behaviorism, humanism assumes the ultimate purpose of learning is to facilitate a self-actualized, autonomous person. Both liberalism and progressivism tend to share some elements of the individualistic tradition, but they differ from each other in terms of the purpose of learning and the source of learning material. Liberalism values explicit knowledge gained from official sources, such as books and research journals, and it favors the potential of developing individual learners along with the growth of basic official knowledge. Progressivism values implicit or unofficial knowledge and skills gained directly from experience. It thus tends to be closely related to performance for the purpose of fulfilling existing roles and tasks. Furthermore, progressivism tends to believe in the dynamic interactions between individuals and society and posits that societal well-being can be realized through learners' obtaining of practical knowledge and skills.

Although human capitalism and radicalism are sharply different in their political positions, they share at least one commonality because both of them emphasize the social implications of learning. Human capitalism assumes that the purpose of learning and any other HRD interventions is for increasing return on investment and it argues for the rights of the sponsoring organizations. Consequently, human capitalism emphasizes the role of learning in improving individual and organizational performance. It often draws on the economic side of learning outcomes. In contrast, radicalism assumes that most social and institutional efforts of organized learning tend to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo. It thus believes that most social and organizational systems have constrained the potential development of their members. Consequently, radicalism shares with human capitalism a belief of social implications of learning. However, unlike human capitalism, which was built on an assumption that the existing system is basically fine and that learning should be used to improve performance and productivity, radicalism challenges the existing social, economic, and political systems and focuses on the wellness of all members of a society. Radicalism, or critical philosophy, argues that the existing capitalistic system tends to privilege only a few, not all, members of a society. It contends that the dominant HRD perspective of performance and productivity functions at the expense of social equity and social responsibility (Bierema, 2000; Schied, 2001).

Although an argument has been made that adult education and HRD are different in their various emphases on different philosophical foundations, one should not simply dismiss the fact that all of the above-discussed philos-

phies of learning are evident in HRD theory and practice to a certain extent. For example, Watkins (1989) proposed five philosophical metaphors for HRD theory and practice. All of them can be traced to the above-mentioned philosophical foundations. She suggested that HRD has five roles: (a) organizational problem solver, (b) organizational change agent/interventionist or helper, (c) organizational designer, (d) organizational empower/meaning maker, and (e) developer of human capital. The first role of HRD, organizational problem solver, tends to correspond to the liberalism and progressivism because both of the two philosophies promote problem-solving ability and competency of the learners. The second role of HRD, organizational change agent or interventionist, shares a belief of radicalism that assumes a planned change of organizational system and the system inevitably maintains its robustness and vitality. The third role of HRD, organizational designer, takes root in behaviorism in its emphasis on efficiency and productivity by designing adequate organizational systems and explicit roles for employees. The fourth role of HRD, organizational empower/meaning maker, implies a humanistic orientation to HRD theory and practice as it values people who are typically repressed and disenfranchised in organizations. This role also has a clear connection with critical philosophy, which sees that its role is to free people from self-imposed coercion such as false consciousness and coercive power structure. Last, the fifth metaphor of human resource developer is that of the developer of human capital. This role has a philosophical foundation in human capitalism that views human beings as costs and benefits. It posits that learning is an investment to gain future returns. Overall, the five roles of HRD suggested by Watkins (1989) have strong connections with philosophical foundations of learning.

### **Can Adult Learning Theory Provide a Foundation for HRD?**

The above discussion has identified several philosophical foundations of HRD theory and practice; it has also outlined relationships among different philosophies from the perspective of learning. An examination of the philosophical foundations of the HRD field is beneficial as it reveals the values, beliefs, assumptions, and principles that underlie HRD theory and practice. Also, comparing and contrasting among different philosophical stands offers a better understanding of our own positions and thus informs us to develop better theories and improve practice. Swanson and Holton (2001) pointed out that as a growing field, HRD faces enormous challenges and opportunities that can be adequately addressed by exploring philosophical questions such as “What is there? (Ontology), How do you know? (epistemology), and Why should I? (ethics)” (p. 70). Clearly, these questions cannot be completely addressed without a solid theory of adult learning. Adult

learning theory attempts to explain exactly these questions: What is knowledge? (Ontology), How do adults learn? (epistemology), and How do adults know right and wrong? (ethics). Consequently, different learning theories have been proposed in the literature to delineate the boundary of knowledge bases and the processes of knowing. This article uses adult learning theory to denote a collection of learning theories proposed to explain the process in which working adults gain knowledge and expertise and the interactions between such learning processes with immediate organizational and social contexts. The above reasoning indicates that adult learning theory provides a foundation for HRD theory and practice because it allows us to identify and clarify commonalities and differences among various philosophical foundations of the field. In other words, adult learning theory explains what, how, and why working adults learn. It therefore can be used to analyze different philosophical foundations of HRD and ultimately inform HRD theory building and practice. This is the first reason why adult learning theory can provide a foundation for HRD theory and practice.

The second reason why adult learning theory can provide a foundation of HRD theory and practice is that it can expand the current scope of the field. The HRD field grew out of many practices such as technical training, human performance technology, and training and development, where HRD interventions are formal and organized learning activities. Consequently, HRD has been defined as a systematic and organized process for developing and unleashing human expertise through organization development and training and development. What is missing in such an approach is informal and untended learning that also influences individual and organizational performance. As a matter of fact, one might argue that employees gain more through informal and incidental learning than through some of the formal activities. Such learning is embedded in an individual's daily work and is highly contextual and thus very different from formal learning activity (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). Equally important to formal training and development programs is a systematic effort to foster an organizational learning culture. As a field of study and practice, HRD should capture the value of various informal and incidental learning activities. Some adult learning concepts, such as self-directed learning projects, can offer valuable insights of such learning. Furthermore, most theories supporting training and development practice, such as instructional design and performance technology, tend to have limited views about the nature of knowledge and expertise. Those theories are predisposed to assume that knowledge and expertise can be well articulated and that they can be systematically transmitted from trainers to trainees. Nevertheless, knowledge and expertise exist not only in the explicit form but also in implicit and tacit forms (Yang, 2003b). To facilitate learning of implicit knowledge, organizations need to develop effective knowledge management strategies other than those traditional training

formats (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In sum, learning is a much broader concept than training, and adult learning should be the focus of HRD theory and practice.

The third reason for adult learning theory to provide a foundation for HRD theories and practices is that it provides a better explanation of adult learning than any other single discipline. The HRD field has been viewed as being supported by three theoretical foundations—namely, economic, psychological, and system theories (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Although the unique contributions of adult learning theory have been long acknowledged (DeSimone et al., 2002; Noe, 2002; Swanson & Holton, 2001), it is normally not regarded as a distinct foundation of HRD. This approach to the theoretical foundation of HRD implies that the discipline of psychology covers adult learning theory. However, a careful examination of the literature indicates that conventional psychology has not paid special attention to the unique characteristics of the adult learner. In fact, many adult learning concepts and theories, such as andragogy and transformational learning, have grown in the field of adult education and they are vital to HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2001).

As an aged field with a strong analytical tradition, conventional psychology seems to have missed the social science revolution. For instance, learning theories in the mainstream literature of psychology tend to view learning as an individual process and pay little or no attention to social and political aspects of learning. This phenomenon is probably due to the lack of the presence of system theory in the field and heavy emphasis on empirical evidence (i.e., explicit knowledge) as a discipline. In contrast, many theories in the adult learning literature acknowledge the dynamic interactions between the individual and the environment. Theories such as self-directed learning, critical pedagogy, and transformational learning inform us that learning is not only an individual psychological process but a social and political process as well. One exception might be social learning theory, which has evolved in the field of psychology. However, like other learning theories developed in the discipline of psychology, it fails to incorporate the political dimension of learning. In summary, adult learning theory can provide a unique foundation for HRD theory and practice that other disciplines fail to acknowledge.

The last and probably most important reason for adult learning theory to provide a foundation for HRD theories and practices is its integrative capacity and role within the field. Adult learning theory should not only be viewed as being capable of providing a foundation for HRD but should also be regarded as one of the key theoretical foundations integrating existing concepts and theories in the HRD field. Gilley and Maycunich (2000) maintained that the HRD field consists of three interrelated areas: (a) learning, (b) performance, and (c) change. One thread connecting these three areas is

learning because both performance and change rely on learning. Adult learning theory can be used to explain and facilitate individual and organizational learning; it can also be utilized to aid performance improvement at both individual and organizational levels. In addition, an inclusive adult learning theory can support research and theory building in the area of organizational change and development. Successful change management at organizational levels may heavily depend on effective learning strategies at the individual level. For instance, it has been hypothesized that transformative learning at the individual level is a prerequisite condition for transformational change and development at the organizational level (Henderson, 2002; Swanson & Holton, 2001). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of studies examining the utility of adult learning theory in other areas of HRD practice. More research is needed to establish the connection between organizational change and development and individual learning. Research and theory building in the area of organization development (OD) can be further enhanced by incorporating ideas and concepts of adult learning theory. Future studies should be conducted to examine the relationships between adult learning concepts such as transformational learning and existing OD theories and models.

### **Conclusion**

There are different views about the relationship between HRD and its closely related field, adult education. Both fields share several philosophical foundations to various degrees. HRD scholars and professionals tend to hold different philosophies because they view the purpose and focus of adult learning differently. An examination of six influential philosophical foundations suggested that learning is vital to all aspects of HRD. At the theoretical level, philosophical questions related to learning are valuable to the advancement of the field. At the practice level, HRD roles suggested in the literature have strong connections with adult learning.

Adult learning theory emerged largely from the field of adult education and can be viewed as a collection of concepts, models, framework, and theories that provides a unique account for what, how, and why working adults learn. HRD as a field of study has long been viewed as being supported by the three theoretical foundations of economic, psychological, and system theories. Although contributions of adult learning theory have been long acknowledged, it is more important to recognize its unique role of incorporating three theoretical foundations and consequently providing a distinct foundation of HRD. By identifying its irreplaceable role, it has been argued that adult learning theory provides a unique foundation for HRD theory and practice that other disciplines have failed to do.



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**Baiyin Yang** is an associate professor of human resource development and adult education at the University of Minnesota. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Georgia and has served on the graduate faculties of Auburn University and University of Idaho. His primary research focus has been on the development and validation of a holistic theory of knowledge and adult learning. His research interests

include program planning and evaluation, adult and organizational learning, power and influence tactics, cross-cultural studies of learning and organizational behavior, and quantitative research methods. He is presently serving as the quantitative method editor of *Human Resource Development Quarterly* and consulting editor of *Adult Education Quarterly*.

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